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On-campus service helps ease student disputes

BY CHRISTOPHER RIVERA
 THE BATTALION

The A-2 Lounge between Hughes and Moses north area residence halls is probably not where one would expect to find legal advice for attempted robbery of a pig, mediation to settle who keeps a puppy, help creating a Last Will and Testament or a place to have divorce papers prepared.

Student Conflict Resolution Services (SCRS) is divided into three interrelated resources, which are Negotiation and Mediation Services, Student Judicial Services and Student Legal Services.

The SCRS offers a wide range of services to assist students in resolving disputes.

Kim Novak, Judicial Services coordinator, said the SCRS "facilitates individual responsibilities and their growth and development."

The SCRS's unique design provides a campus dispute resolution center with "logical connections to address legal, judicial and dispute resolution concerns of Texas A&M students," she said.

Novak said the three services also refer to each other to effectively solve the problem.

Rene Harris, interim coordinator of Negotiation and Mediation Services, said the center is staffed with professional certified mediators.

Negotiation and Mediation Services provides mediation to help resolve student disputes and personal conflicts.

Harris said common issues addressed by this service are roommate disputes, lease agreements, sexual harassment and conflict over bill payment.

The private, voluntary and interactive process, "teaches students how to objectively facilitate communication and resolve conflicts on their own," Harris said.

Mediation explores many avenues for settlement and can help preserve business or personal relationships.

"It doesn't have to be a huge dispute to come in for mediation," Harris said. "We try to prevent the conflict, because resentment continues and communication breaks down."

This is the third story in a series about support services available on campus for students. The series will run through the week and highlight a different support service every day.

"The key is to be open and honest, try to see the other person's perspective, use active listening skills and respect the other person's view."

Harris said that information will remain confidential. Any notes taken during mediation are destroyed immediately following the session. The only record on file is whether the case is settled.

Student Judicial Services also conducts student judicial proceedings when a student has allegedly committed a violation of the Student Conduct Code in the Texas A&M University Regulations.

Action can be taken through the Student Judicial Services in addition to any criminal or civil action taken off campus.

Novak said that unlike a judicial system that focuses on punishment, "the primary objective here is to educate."

"We would rather have students learn here than outside of the school," she said.

Novak said the most common issues addressed are theft, minors in possession of alcohol, driving while intoxicated and sexual assault.

"One of the first things we do is offer mediation between parties in a dispute," Novak said. "The optimum goal is to resolve the conflict in this educational phase."

Rick Powell, a licensed attorney for Student Legal Services, provides students with legal advice. He said Student Legal Services can handle most — but not all — legal matters.

"SCRS cannot represent students against Texas A&M University or another Texas A&M student and cannot represent students in a court of law," Powell said.

Student Legal Services informs students of their legal rights through private interviews, consultations or publications that helps maintain confidentiality for students who may serve as a speaker for recognized student organizations.

"Students should take precautions for their safety, act like responsible Aggies and hopefully not have any problems," Powell said.

The office is financially supported by student service fees, so there is no additional fees for appointments or consultations.

"The A-2 lounge is a little known, but valuable resource for all the students of Texas A&M," Novak said. "Students seeking services who enter the A-2 lounge do not leave without knowing who will help them."

"We try to prevent conflict, because resentment continues and communication breaks down."
 Rene Harris
 interim coordinator of
 Negotiation and
 Mediation Services

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